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The Statecraft of Charles de Gaulle

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France is undergoing the most terrible crisis of her history. Her frontiers, her empire, her independence, and even her soul are threatened by destruction. Now a truly French government no longer exists . . . . In its state of servitude [the Vichy government] cannot be, and is not, other than an instrument used by the enemies of France against the honor and interest of the country. It is thus necessary that a new power assume the charge of directing the French war effort. Events have imposed this sacred duty upon me. I will not fail.

-- Charles de Gaulle, 1940

At this moment, the worst in her history [1940], it was for me to assume the burden of France.

-- Charles de Gaulle,  
Les Memoires de Guerre, 1954

The heaviest cross I have to bear is the Cross of Lorraine.

-- Winston Churchill

In assessing the statecraft of any statesman, it is necessary to understand the historical context in which he moved and acted, and the assumptions and lessons he drew from it. The case of Charles de Gaulle, President of the French Republic from 1958 to 1969, illustrates this maxim with particular acuteness. De Gaulle's experiences and his conception of France--drawn in large part from those experiences--make him perhaps unique in 20th-century history in the extent to which all he did was a product of personal, and national, history.

Charles de Gaulle was born in 1890 into a Catholic, patriotic, and nationalist family which had produced writers, historians, and professors. His family thus stood on the conservative side of the great divide in French society which was manifested most notably in the Dreyfus Affair, but which went far

beyond it. As a boy, he showed a great interest in military matters. He was educated at the famous military academy at Saint-Cyr, and in 1913 joined an infantry regiment commanded by Colonel Philippe Petain, with whom he was to have a long association.

De Gaulle had an outstanding record in World War I. He was wounded and mentioned in dispatches several times, and was a prisoner of war for a lengthy period. During the interwar years, the patronage of Petain, by then a field marshal and France's national hero, together with his own substantial abilities, gained de Gaulle prestigious staff assignments. He also served in the occupied Rhineland and the Middle East. De Gaulle also gained a reputation as a military intellectual, publishing several books. One work, The Army of the Future (1934), criticized France's reliance on static defense and mass armies, as embodied in the Maginot Line, calling instead for a mechanized, mobile, and highly professional force. De Gaulle's pertinacity in pressing these ideas with politicians and in the Army angered his superiors, while a squabble with Petain over de Gaulle's publishing another book under his own name led to a break between the two.

When war came in 1939, de Gaulle was commander of a tank brigade. In 1940, he was promoted to brigadier general and given command of an armored division. He acquitted himself well in the disastrous campaigns of that year, and in June accepted ministerial office as undersecretary for war in Paul Reynaud's government.

When the Reynaud government fell shortly thereafter and was replaced by one headed by Marshal Petain which sought an armistice, de Gaulle crossed the Rubicon. Escaping to Great Britain, he broadcast to the French nation and armed forces, appealing to them to continue the war under his leadership. This action bears serious analysis. De Gaulle was an obscure brigadier who had held junior office for less than a month. He had no French following and was almost completely unknown in Britain. Yet, with magnificent effrontery, he set himself against the legitimate government of France--a government headed by a national hero which, at first, enjoyed wide popular support--and claimed to embody in himself the spirit and glory of France. Even more amazing is the fact that he succeeded in this bizarre endeavor, outmaneuvering his French rivals, organizing armed forces, and managing to gain a seat--if an ambiguous one--at the table of the victors. This was accomplished not with suave diplomacy, but with prickliness and an unstinting insistence on what he regarded as his own and France's honor. Churchill was exasperated by him, Roosevelt loathed him, but in the end there was no substitute for him. By the fall of 1944, when the liberation of France was accomplished, he had no rival.

De Gaulle might have been expected to play the leading role in the postwar government; instead, his departure from the political scene was as sudden as his arrival on it. After heading two provisional governments, he abruptly resigned in early 1946, out of dissatisfaction with the political parties in the coalition government and the weakness of the government itself.

Although he started a movement, the RPF, which grew into a briefly-successful party, de Gaulle held no office for 12 years. For much of that time, he brooded at his home in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, where he wrote his wartime memoirs.

In 1958, France was on the brink of civil war. A military revolt had broken out in Algeria, which threatened to spread to France. De Gaulle returned to power as premier, with special powers voted by the National Assembly. By the end of the year, he had become President of a plebiscitary Fifth Republic, with a new constitution providing for a strong executive replacing the parliamentary regime which had governed France for nearly 80 years.

De Gaulle's statecraft emerged from a unique set of assumptions about the world and France's place in it, which he held and acted upon with remarkable consistency throughout his years in power. Central to this scheme was the conception of France as a Great Power--not merely in a military or diplomatic sense, but in the more profound meaning of a nation with a unique civilizing mission, a "light to the Gentiles". "France," he wrote in his memoirs, "cannot be France without greatness." By "greatness" de Gaulle meant not simply excellence in invoking the traditional instruments of national power, but also in being the vessel and the bearer of a higher culture. His appointment of Andre Malraux as Minister of Culture and the increased attention paid to France's artistic, literary, and monumental heritage during his presidency were integral parts of this scheme. Equally vital to his worldview was his conception of his own unique

relationship to France, a relationship bolstered by the circumstances of his coming to power. He had not been elevated in 1958 by "the cackling of parliamentary majorities", as Bismarck put it in a different context. Rather, Marianne, in her hour of great distress, had summoned the hero of 1940 to save her from internecine war. He had answered the nation's call, saved it again, and now, with overwhelming popular support and an unassailable domestic position, could put his plans into effect. Finally, de Gaulle had a conception of Europe which was strongly at odds with the accepted ones of both Western and Eastern thinking. While quite realistic about Soviet aims and means (as his unflinching position on Berlin illustrated), de Gaulle did not see the continent as frozen into two postwar power blocs in which, perforce, the nations must follow the leads of the superpowers. He rather saw a Europe in which there was room for maneuver by France. His ultimate end--a Europe of independent states under French leadership, mediating between East and West--was visionary, but many concrete things could and would be done.

De Gaulle's concept of the French national interest was inseparable from his preconceptions concerning its greatness and civilizing mission. To fulfill its destiny, France must have independent national military power; it could not depend on anyone else for its security. In particular, the "Anglo-Saxons" (the United States and Britain) could not be allowed to dominate Western Europe or interfere with France's own responsibility for its defense. France alone must make its decisions on matters military.

The genesis of this is not difficult to discern. The circumstances of 1940 had forced de Gaulle to go to Britain essentially as a mendicant; for four years, he had to rely on others to rescue his beloved France. While substantial Free French armed forces were eventually raised, de Gaulle had to accept the bitter reality that, because of France's failure in 1940, its salvation lay with the United States and Great Britain. All his prickly insistence on his own and France's honor could not change the fact that he was a minor player in Allied councils.

De Gaulle's absolute determination that this situation never recur provoked his principal objectives in foreign policy. He intended to remove France from NATO's unified command structure, and the apparatus from French soil. In a nuclear age, strategic nuclear weapons were the ultima ratio regem; therefore, France must have a credible nuclear deterrent under its exclusive control. France's mission of political and cultural greatness in Western Europe demanded French supremacy in the recently-created EEC; therefore, a rapprochement with West Germany, the other powerful member, was indicated. The United States and Britain, on the other hand, must be kept at arms' length, as far as European affairs were concerned. Finally, these presuppositions pointed the way toward a more independent foreign policy on a worldwide basis, including dealings with the Eastern Bloc.

In carrying out this policy to attain his ends, de Gaulle had significant resources to employ. His gradual disengagement from the Algerian war, together with general postwar prosperity,



secured his base at home. For most of his first term, de Gaulle enjoyed wide popular support. France had a strategic location, substantial population and natural resources, and a great military and diplomatic tradition. Most importantly, de Gaulle knew exactly what he wanted to do, and shrewdly sized up his Anglo-Saxon and Eastern adversaries, many of whom he had known during the war.

On the other hand, de Gaulle faced significant obstacles in returning France to the position he sought. The freezing of Europe into competing power blocs reduced his room for maneuver, and the bipolarity of the early postwar world lessened the relative weight of French power. Finally, de Gaulle knew that, in the ultimate test of national survival--a general nuclear exchange--he was dependent on the United States for France's security, and that there was nothing he could do about it.

De Gaulle's fundamental tools in effecting his foreign policy were diplomacy, coupled with a substantial amount of public posturing for foreign and domestic consumption. His one substantial foray into economic coercion, the boycott of EEC activities in 1965, was a fiasco. He misjudged both French domestic support for European integration and the economic power he could wield in the EEC. However, de Gaulle's public diplomacy was generally quite successful. It was based on an acute knowledge of men and affairs, and a fine calculation of how far France could go in a given situation. De Gaulle accurately sized up Adenauer's desire for improved relations with France as a means of further integrating West Germany into Europe, and

adroitly played on the fears provoked by the "Anglo-Saxons'" seeming willingness to negotiate over Berlin. With respect to the NATO situation, de Gaulle judged correctly that a gradual process of disengagement, with periodic protestations of loyalty to the alliance qua alliance, would be acceptable domestically, attain the desired end, and yet not provoke a reaction that would deprive France of the ultimate protection of the American nuclear umbrella. This was essentially a gauging of the balance of power--a realization that the United States would accept the blow to NATO rather than lose a nation of France's significance as an ally against the USSR. His success in doing this was dramatically illustrated by President Kennedy's remarks to a French journalist shortly before his death: "Both [French Foreign Minister] Couve de Murville and I had to admit that we were not in agreement on anything. And we both accepted the fact that this total disagreement should not damage the friendship between two great western countries." When the President of the United States threw up his hands in this way, de Gaulle's diplomacy had won.

Ultimately, one must consider whether de Gaulle's statecraft succeeded or failed. By any measure, it must be accounted a short-term success. De Gaulle achieved virtually all of his foreign policy objectives. France withdrew from NATO's command structure, while still retaining the ultimate protection of the alliance. A rapprochement with West Germany was achieved. Great Britain's application for EEC membership was rejected. A significant independent French nuclear deterrent was created. All of this was accomplished through the same sort of prickly

insistence on France's (and de Gaulle's) uniqueness and grandeur that had worked in the far more parlous times of 1940-1944.

Having said this, what is the relevance of de Gaulle's foreign policy for today? In one respect, it was magnificently prescient; the collapse of the USSR and Warsaw Pact, and the consequent diminution of NATO's importance, have resulted in a European world closer to that of 1914 than anything since. It is exactly what de Gaulle would have wanted: a European state of nature in which France could truly have the opportunity to implement a foreign policy of grandeur. Ironically, however, it has not been France that has grasped this opportunity, but its ancient enemy, Germany. Reunited and pursuing a more active foreign policy, it seems likely that Germany will, even with the huge dislocations and expense of swallowing its eastern state, dominate the new Europe, while France takes a less active role. If this occurs, it will illustrate a fundamental fact of statecraft which de Gaulle, for all the brilliance of his planning and execution, may have lost sight of--the relationship of means to ends. France, in the final analysis, may lack the physical and economic means, and the national will, to play in a new Europe the role de Gaulle set for it. This does not mean that its role will not be significant, but that the European leadership it enjoyed for most of the period from 1661 to 1815 is no longer within its power.

Charles de Gaulle was unique, as France is unique; much of his success was due to the fact that he embodied feelings that resonate deeply in the souls of many Frenchmen. Sophisticated

Americans may have regarded his appeals to glory and grandeur as ludicrous, but they have been fundamental in French high culture since the 17th century, and one ignores them at one's peril when dealing with France. De Gaulle's father was a professor of literature, and, as a boy, the future president certainly studied the plays of Pierre Corneille, one of the greatest dramatists of France's Golden Age. Le Cid, one of his most famous plays, tells the story of the medieval hero Rodrigo de Bivar [Don Rodrigue]. At its end, his king addresses him in words which de Gaulle no doubt felt applicable to himself as he fought the enemies of France:

Time often renders lawful that which seems  
At first to be inseparable from guilt. . . .  
Rodrigue, thou meanwhile must resume thine arms.  
Already thou hast here at home defeated  
The Moors, foiled their intent, and hurled them back.  
Carry the war now into their own country.  
Command my armies and lay waste their land.  
The mere name of the Cid will make them tremble.  
They have already given thee the title  
Of "lord"; they soon will wish thee for their king.  
But midst thine exploits remain ever true  
To her thou lovest; return still worthier  
Of her, if that be possible; and force her  
By thy great deeds to have in thee such pride  
That she will then rejoice to be thy bride.

To himself, and to millions of Frenchmen, de Gaulle embodied the teaching of Corneille about another national savior: one must cultivate the energy of one's soul in order to elevate oneself above common life and make the sacrifices that family, society, and nation may require. In its triumphs and in its failures, de Gaulle's life and statecraft exemplified these national ideals.